

someday, time will pull us back together by tml1

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Summary:

"What had it been, then? A parting gift? It meant nothing more than a goodbye. Obviously."

It's 1988 and Will Byers has a five point plan he must execute before senior year wraps up.

That'll probably be the easy part considering he's going to have to hide the fact he's been in love with Mike Wheeler ever since they were kids.

[Currently on Hold.]

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

A note before reading:

This story takes place in an alternate universe where the events of *Stranger Things* never happened. The kids are just normal high schoolers without any sort of supernatural related trauma.

Please be aware that there are references to self harm, the theme of depression, and an eating disorder. So if this isn't your thing, that's fine! Proceed at your own discretion.

Will stares at his food, only managing a few bites before his stomach can't handle anymore, and he sits in his mooney, broody, silent until he can't stand listening to Jonathan and his mother worry about him and he excuses himself.

He half expects them to tell him he has to stay, but the two of them just let him go, not even asking any questions as he grabs his coat and heads outside.

The cold wind hits Will's face and it's refreshing, pulling him out of his misery enough that he can at least smile at the beginnings of the sunset. He starts walking, not headed anywhere in particular, and studies the pinks and oranges of the sky as the sun hangs down close to the horizon. This time of year, the sky won't darken completely, which means Will doesn't have to worry about being stuck outside with no light and he can walk aimlessly for as long as he wants.

His aimless wandering, as it turns out, is not as aimless as he'd hoped. Will ends up at the lake, staring out at the water lapping.

And now, here he is nearly four years later, wishing he'd done things differently.

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Summer is the worst. The hot, humid air clings to his skin, making the clothes he preferred - those that covered every inch of skin apart from his hands and face - unbearable.

There is a place Will likes to go when the world no longer seems to be on his side. It's not easy to access, and nobody else knows about it. It is that fact that has him going back there again and again.

Three stories above the dead, deserted streets of Hawkins, he sits on the edge of a roof and watches the small people below with weary eyes. His legs dangle over the side.

For just a moment, he wonders what would happen if he jumps.

It would be a quick death, ten seconds at most before his body squelches against the sidewalk, leaving a twisted body and a blood stain that would last for far longer than those who walk the streets would want it to.

The police would be called to the scene, and they would fall over his body, trying to gather up the lifeless corpse. They would mourn his death as the bystanders continued to walk by, maybe curious as to why the police were there or saddened if they caught sight of the mangled mess left behind, but the feelings would fade quickly.

At the end of the day, only two people would mourn his death.

It's a sad thought, and with practiced ease, he swings his legs back onto the building, and leaves the roof. Staying can only bring more sad thoughts, and even if it's only two people that would care if he jumps, he won't do it today.

No matter how much he wants to.

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Will's bedroom is small. There's a desk in the far right wall, a bed squished to the far left, and not much else except for some old band posters. A window fills the space in between the bed and desk on the far wall with stapled on mauve curtains. The window is an awkward height that leaves Will morbidly curious of how injured he'd be if he fell, but too nervous to act on his curiosity.

He likes to keep his window open, the faint smell of rain and rubber and something he can't quite distinguish drifting into his room. It's soothing, especially late at night when only a trickle of cars are left to traverse the worn roads, their engines steady and easy to listen to. The air leaves his arms full of goosebumps, but he likes it all too much to consider closing the window and look out of it that way. The

night isn't as beautiful with a barrier of glass shielding his view.

On particularly long days when Will doesn't have the energy to seek out the rooftop, He opens his window and sticks himself halfway out, feet bumping against the side of the roof. The half terrified, half thrilled feeling calms him in a way he knows it shouldn't.

He wonders what his mother would do if she caught him like this, so close to sliding out and hitting the ground below. She'd bring him back to the doctor and demand for his dosage to be put higher. She'd look at him, with that heart shattering gaze, those soft and gentle eyes, with pity.

Will hates it.

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Will has known El (Only Mike fucking Wheeler calls her that) Eleanor for the last four and a half years. Ever since his mother had received a phone call from her old friend, from high school, who said he was moving back to Hawkins with his daughter from Wisconsin.

He learned that she is in the same grade as him. That she had been hauled all the way across the country in the middle of the school year.

He's talked to her. Of course he has. But their conversations never tread any further than some simple, mindless chatter to fill the awkward tense air between them.

She doesn't talk about anything. About her classes. About Wisconsin. About the crushed bag of chips hidden at the bottom of her bag. She doesn't talk as though they've known each other for years. It means he doesn't have to talk much in return.

She doesn't say much when they're together. Just picks at the skin around her nails and watches Will. It should be creepy, but really it just makes him feel uncomfortable.

So, sure, you could say he's known Eleanor for years. But he hasn't got a clue who she is.

He knows she's caring. He knows that. She's nice. He knows that. She's sweet. He knows that.

He knows El is everything he isn't.

Will wants to hold a grudge against her. He wants to "hate" her, but he can't. Something deep inside won't let him.

One thing he does know about Eleanor is that she isn't like everyone else in this god forsaken town.

She's weird. But the good kind. She's a freak of nature. Just like him.

Will wants to, perhaps, make friends. She does already come over the house a lot when Joyce invites her and the Chief over for dinner, but keeps to himself. He was never one to venture outside of his comfort zone too much. Though it depends on the prerogative.

She shoots him a furtive glance from across the dinner table. Mouths out an *"Are you okay?"*

He didn't think anyone else noticed. Not through the laughter and red wine their parents are drinking.

El notices. She always does.

She catches all the little things he doesn't want her to.

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Will thought he would cry when he retreated to his room, but he can't. His feelings feel far away, like a dull but constant ache in his chest. Sometimes he sobs openly and wouldn't stop until he's exhausted, and sometimes it's like this.

He just wants to be alone. In fact, he wants to completely disappear. Lying on his bed, ignoring how stale the greying sheets smell, he imagines his flesh and bones melting away until he is nothing but a non corporeal entity, floating above his bed. Of course, that isn't where he wants to be. He wants to be somewhere dark, empty, and away from people.

He can hardly feel the dull ache or even his own body anymore. He's so detached, as if he barely exists at all.

It provides him a strange relief, but after an hour of it, it starts to scare him. His disconnect from the world and from himself makes him feel as though he is falling away from existence, like he might somehow erase himself from the world this way. As much as the idea appeals to him, the act of convincing himself it's possible triggers a survival instinct, and he starts panicking. The seams rip.

It begins with hurried, shallow breaths which turn to be all out gasping. Finally, the tears begin to come.

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Will loosens his death grip around himself and tries to relax from his tense position. His headache starts to fail to a light thumping but his back is beginning to throb where bones dig into the hardwood. He slowly pushes himself up and makes his way to his bed. Will climbs under his blanket and pulls it tight around himself. A hand rubbing gently on the temples of his head. A small snuffle escapes him.

If he doesn't sleep, the nightmares don't come.

Tomorrow will be better.

He chants his mantra over and over again. Hopefully one day it'll come true.

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He could hover around the edge, but if he loses himself, he'd start to panic. Once he feels sufficiently numb, he pulls his mixtape out from his pocket. He pushes play and is lulled by the opening chords of [Ivo](#).

The late august air up is warm, the gusts rushing past his face aid the music in keeping him from going too deep into dissociation, but still keeping him near that blessed edge of unreality.

Will cycles through the woods until his muscles ache from overexertion. When he's done, he goes home. He takes a hot bath, watches red swirl down the drain, sobs until he can't cry anymore, then, after drinking several cups of water, he wraps himself in his duvet, imagining he's a little goblin in a cave, until he falls asleep.

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“ *You're quiet* . Is everything alright honey?”

“I'm fine, mom,” he answers, doing his best to keep out the quaver in his voice. His ribs burn as he picks at his food on the dinner plate.

“Is...” Jonathan hesitates for a second, scanning Will slowly before settling for a soft, concerned gaze as they lock eyes. “Are you excited about school?”

“Sure.” Better to keep his answers curt than give anything more away. Jonathan is irritatingly more perceptive than Will even on his sharpest of days.

Joyce settles on something with an expectant air as she speaks. “Maybe this year you could try and make a friend. Didn't Mrs. Chaundey put that on the list?”

“She did.” The words are out of his mouth before he can even think about the consequences. He tries his best to salvage the situation so his mother doesn't try to ask something that Will *cannot* do.

Will can recite the five point plan by heart:

1. *List seven things you love.*

1. *TALK TO PEOPLE!*

1. *Go on a date (with someone you actually LIKE!)*

1. *Make friends (your age, your guidance counselor DOESN'T count!)*

1. *Celebrate New Years (with OTHER PEOPLE!)*

“She said I could add it to the list if I *wanted* to.”

Joyce mulls over his answer. "Well, if you ever decide to invite them over, just know their welcome at any time."

She's talking as though there's someone to invite. "Thanks, mom," he says clearly sarcastic and snippy, "I'll be sure to invite them over once we're a bit closer."

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Fate, destiny - *whatever you want to call it* - has a way of being cruel.

Will can never understand how it's not to be blamed for the twists and turns it creates in this world where seemingly nothing and everything happens.

He can describe his life as humble, maybe a little boring, never too controllable and definitely not anything to be enthusiastic about. It's a never ending monotony, it's saddening - he isn't waiting for the next day to come, only waiting for it to pass.

Of course, Will has thought about it - if he could be happy the way used to be, if he needs changes, and what he could do to compensate for the emptiness he feels. But then again, he isn't too sure if those changes can actually make him achieve fulfillment.

What if he is just never meant to know the feeling of coming home?

He doesn't like that fact, but he has accepted it over the years.

He has also accepted the fact that he *had* to say goodbye to them.

Because they wouldn't have ever understood.

Will hands over the note without a word.

I didn't know how to say goodbye.

This is going to be better for all of us.

His stomach clenches with cold anxiousness, his hand shaking.

This could be anything. This could just be another one of his notes.

It's not.

His stomach twists and he has to leave. Will has to flee the scene before the person in front of him starts talking. Someone from behind calls out for him, startled, but he ignores them and retreats.

Has he dreamed everything up?

No.

It isn't a dream. It's Will being an asshole. An inscrutable asshole to the world's sweetest boy.

That had been Will's goodbye.

Fuck.

What had it been, then? A parting gift?

It meant nothing more than a goodbye.

Obviously.

So. That's why Jonathan is driving him to school today. And nothing is more embarrassing than having your older brother drive you to your first day of senior year.

But... it's not like he really cares what anyone thinks. He fades into the shadows - going unnoticed most of the time, if he's lucky - and ignores the hushed gossiping, about *Freaky Will Byers*, and sideways, disgusted glances.

Jonathan looks at him, driving for a while without speaking. Will

doesn't try to interrupt the silence. His mind is finally silent after the clattering. It's void, empty, and he likes it that way. Will presses his face against the car window, not caring that it shakes his whole head hard enough that his teeth feel like they're vibrating.

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Will walks slowly, trying his best to ignore the feeling of pins and needles in his legs.

When he rounds the corner of the hall he suddenly slams into someone, walking in a hurried fashion. They slam into each other abruptly and it sends him reeling.

"Ouch!" The person whines before extending a tan freckled hand, nails adorned with black nail polish, down to him.

He lets himself be pulled up, rubbing his head in annoyance. Now he is definitely going to be late.

Couldn't this kid just watch where she was-

Will looks up and *holy crap*.

This isn't just some kid.

Because the universe really has it out for him - the person who Will

accidentally runs into is no one other than Max Mayfield. With her icy blue eyes, her witty comments, and kind heart.

The girl he was friends with for years. The girl who hurt him.

Just seeing her shade of red orangish hair makes Will's heart race. It's like apophenia - he's back in middle school again - his brain is seeing things with the barest of connections and connecting them immediately, trying to convince himself that it was important, that it meant something.

All it fucking means is that Will is pathetic.

Four years and six months ago.

This is, quite possibly, going to be the greatest day of Will's life.

He's planned it out meticulously for two weeks now, and there is nothing that could possibly thwart this. He's examined it from every angle, thought up solutions for every scenario, and he knows there is no world in which tonight could go poorly.

Well, that's not totally true.

“Where are you going?”

That could put a slight damper on the night. But Jonathan really shouldn't mind that he's going to spend his evening with Mike. It's definitely not the first time Will's left with little to no warning to go visit him.

“The hill past Cornwallis.”

“Oh.” Jonathan's voice softens at that, which is a little weird, but maybe he's just tired. “Will-” he starts, then stops himself. There's clearly something he wants to say, but he's stopping himself.

“What?” He frowns.

His brother opens his mouth, closes it, and shakes his head. “Never mind. Have fun.”

Will grins to stop himself from worrying about what his brother wanted to say. He can figure it out later. He has the rest of his life to worry. Tonight, he's going to let himself live in the moment and not let his anxieties get the best of him. He's mentally gone through his plan a hundred times today alone. Nothing will go wrong, and his brother slightly off, doesn't constitute an alteration to the plan.

It can't be more than ten minutes before they're seated on the hill that overlooks most of the town. They've been here before but Mike is

staring like it's the first time he's seen it. Granted, Will is staring at Mike like it's the first time he's seen him, so he supposes he can't judge. But there's just something about the way Mike's light softens his edges that captivates Will. He really can't think of anything more beautiful than Mike drenched in moonlight.

Mike pulls Will close to him, snaking one arm around his waist, and it really is perfect. Will is entranced, the ghost of a smile playing at his lips like he's too in awe to bother with facial expressions right now. His heart could just about burst.

Will leans his head on Mike's shoulder, letting the warmth he always radiates seep into his body. He watches the rise and fall of Mike's chest, working up the courage to say what he really came here to say. He has to say it; he won't back out again.

Years ago, when he'd asked Jonathan how he knew he liked Nancy Wheeler, he told him, *"Sometimes, you just know. Everything in the universe just screams at you."* Will hadn't understood back then. But tonight? Tonight, he really, truly, understands. Tonight, the stars are all telling him it's time, *it's time*.

"Will?" Mike's voice is quiet and raspy as he shifts just enough that Will lifts his head up. The confession Will had ready to go dies on his lips at Mike's expression. "I... need to tell you something."

Will swallows and nods silently, not trusting his own admission to not slip out if he dares to open his mouth. He just needs to shift a few words around in his brain and-

“You’re my best friend, you know that right?”

Why does Mike's tone make this sound like a break up?

“Right,” he manages. His brain is too busy suddenly coming up with a thousand terrible ways for tonight to end that it had somehow conveniently neglected to think of before right now.

“I don’t want this to change things between us,” Mike says carefully. Will is getting whiplash from this conversation, and he really has no idea what to think now. His brain has gone from everything is fine to everything is terrible to just blank in a matter of seconds.

“Um. Okay.” Will responds, and even he can hear how hollow and empty his words sound, but his brain is not currently working to deal with that.

“I, um,” he sighs and looks down. “I should have told you sooner, I know, but I- I’m-” Mike squeezes his eyes shut despite the fact that he isn’t looking at Will anyways. “I asked El out.”

Oh.

Mike could have socked Will and it would’ve hurt less than that.

And now Mike is rambling. Right now, every word Mike is saying just stabs further into Will's chest, twisting into his heart until he's sure

that Mike driving a literal, physical, knife into him would hurt less.

Will doesn't know what to do or say. He wants to just sink down into the grass and lie there forever.

It shouldn't feel like a break up. They're not dating, and clearly they never will be, but Will's body doesn't seem to understand that with the way it's seizing up and then shutting down, going completely numb. His arms are heavy and his stomach is dropping, dropping, and he thinks he might genuinely get sick. He doesn't feel like he's going to cry, though. He just feels empty.

Really, they never stood a chance. Really, this was bound to be disastrous and Will was bound to be left feeling like the world is burning around him, and now, he's paying the price.

"Will?"

"It's fine." It's not. "I get it." He doesn't. "You like her."

So no, Will doesn't get it, but he's not going to tell Mike that. He's not going to tell Mike anything, because if he does, he's going to break open completely.

"...She was *your* friend first."

"Honestly, Mike. It's fine."

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“Did you know?”

Will had meant to say *hey* or *don't bother me for the next six months* , but as soon as he sees his friends, his mouth decides to move without his consent.

Mike and Dustin both frown, while Max and Lucas share glances. El isn't there, because, otherwise, she'd be sitting with them. Secretly he's relieved. This is an issue he only wants to discuss with his trusted long time friends.

“About me,” he clarifies, “Did you know?” Will's voice cracks, and he hates it, because he doesn't cry in front of them. He never has before. He's been roughed up, kicked at, and he's never cried in front of them. Not once. But he's been on the verge of tears for close to an hour now and he's one wrong word away from completely losing it.

They must have known. He can see it in their faces. He can see it in Mike's face too, which isn't so surprising. But he can also see it in Dustin, Max, and Lucas's faces, which means he wasn't as discreet about it as he thought.

“You all knew?” The lack of any verbal answer is all the affirmation Will needs. “*You all knew?*”

“Will-” Max starts.

“No. No! Don't even- No. It doesn't matter.” He runs a hand through his hair, if only to give his hand something to do besides hang useless at his side. “Just. Don't talk to me anymore.”

There is the same confused call of “*What?*” coming from all of them.

“You heard me.”

He ignores the looks on everyone's faces and stomps off, barely making it out of the lunchroom before he breaks. It doesn't matter anyways.

Nothing matters.

--

And okay, Will knows he's probably being a little overdramatic, but he can't bring himself to care right now. He's only fourteen.

He wraps his arms around his pillow, drawing it close to him. He squeezes his eyes shut and finally allows himself to cry.

He's going to spend the rest of his life being the last to know things, and he's known *this* for the past two years, but it still sucks.

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"Byers? Are you okay?" Max's voice brings him back to reality. Byers. Guess he's on last name basis now.

Last name basis with the girl he's known since the fifth grade. The girl that moved from California, had no friends, and was way cooler than any of the party members. The girl that joined their party and became their zoomer. The girl that stood up for him time and time again.

Will swallows the hurt and looks down, preparing himself for the worst.

If Will had a single ounce of *anything* left in his brain, he might be a little freaked out, but instead he just stares at Max and she stares right back at him.

"I'm fine," he says like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

He doesn't hate Max, he never could. He doesn't hate her. He mostly just hates the empty feeling that she along with the others left him

with and he hates the fact that no one else was even hurt at all. Or if they were, they just shook it off and moved on, and Will should do the same. He is well aware. But he can't bring himself to.

"How are you doing? How was your summer, man?"

Will shrugs. Noncommittal.

Max perseveres. "I was just wondering if we had any classes together. Lucas is a literal genius and he's the other side to me, and I remembered that you used to love artsy stuff, so I was just... curious I guess."

Will doesn't say anything in return.

He tries to listen to Max after, he really does. But each word grates into his brain and tears through his flesh. Each word pounds against his skull until he can't take it anymore, and he makes up a weak lie about needing to get to American History early.

She smiles and waves at him from halfway down the hall, flooded with grimy teenagers, and Will can barely manage to convince his hand to lift and wave back. He's sure his face is wiped clean of any possible emotion because he's instantly gone numb, but Max's smile doesn't falter.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Like they weren't meant to be right-person-wrong-time star-crossed lovers in some overdramatic, poorly cast play. Like the stars could have aligned for them - two kids who spent most of their lives caught up in a world bigger than them, two kids who were raised knowing they would always be on opposite sides of things.

Notes for the Chapter:

this exposition is so awkward, i apologize to anyone still reading.

Saturday is an odd day.

Will forces the image of Max Mayfield out of his head as he sits down at the breakfast table. His mother's pinched face lets him know she's itching to ask how the first day of school went, and it's taking everything in her to not ask.

He wakes up every day with the sun, and breakfast is always somewhat ready and waiting by the time he makes his way down the hall and into the kitchen area. Usually toast with jam, or eggs cooked up with a bit of olive oil.

He never complains about anything and always accepts what he is offered with a smile and a *thank you* . He wonders if Jonathan is reading his micro-expressions, this particular morning, or taking note of how much he eats, and of what. Will thinks that sounds like

something he'd do - his brother is the definition of *detail oriented* personified.

It becomes a routine.

Some days they chat, other days his mother and Jonathan seem to sense that he isn't quite well enough for talking and lets him eat his breakfast undisturbed in companionable silence. On the days he does want to talk, they listen, and on the days when he needs a distraction, they've got 900 years of small-talk and funny stories to regale him with.

There is a worried crease on Joyce's brow.

It happens again the next day.

Jonathan and his mother are sharing concerned looks while Will is usually quiet.

Something is wrong.

Still, his mother gives him a small smile, no different than any other day. Just as she opens her mouth to say something, Will gets up from the table, the chair scuffs on the floor, abandoning the food he never intended on eating in the first place, and flops on the couch to watch old tv show reruns. He rests his head on the arm, making it clear he doesn't want to talk.

So he doesn't.

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Will is self-medicating in the quiet of his room. The ridges of his ceiling are keeping his attention. The cracks scream open, the tears running across his skin like water drops. His hands are relatively soft, but the whites of his nails aren't there anymore, his fingertips red from nail-biting.

His eyes are closed, eyelashes barely fluttered against his peaches and cream skin, hands strewn out beside him. It's the early hours of the morning, late enough that the moon is still watching over, but early enough to where a strand of the sun is reaching into the clouds. The crickets are singing, the trees are silently laughing, and there's small talk coming from outside. It's making the ache between his rib cage thrum with less energy, and he's in a tired haze as he breathes out and hopes to fall back asleep.

He can't remember the last time he's worn a sleeveless shirt, but the scars look old, faded to raised white lines and pink slashes, all neatly aligned with one another along his shoulder and the inside of his upper arm. He feels a strange desire to run his finger down them like spines on a bookcase, replay the self-hatred he had felt when he'd put the razor to his skin until he understood it.

-

Jonathan elbows him. "You okay?"

Will nods. "I'm just tired." He glances around. Their mother is locked in a conversation with Hopper, while Eleanor, sitting at the table, follows along half-heartedly, which makes this the perfect time for his escape. "I think I might go lie down for a little while."

His older brother gives him a strange look. "You sure you're feeling alright?"

"I think I just ate something bad at lunch," he lies easily. "Seriously. I just need to take a nap, and then I'll be fine."

Jonathan doesn't exactly look like he believes him, but he lets him off the hook anyways. "If you're sure. Let me know if you need anything though, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

He pushes himself off the couch and to his feet and quietly pads back to his room. He all but falls into his bed and stares up at the ceiling.

Will is staring at his ceiling and all he can think about is... *Mike*

Wheeler.

He's thinking about four years ago, when Mike had forced him to go out in the cold. They'd stayed out late and they had all been shivering and wet with melted snow on their coats.

"Do you wanna stay the night?" Mike had blurted out as if they were little kids.

Will's face had softened and he nodded.

The two of them had sat on the basement floor and played games on the atari. When their hot cocoa was gone and they could hardly keep their eyes open.

Will laid back on Mike's bed, looking up at the ceiling so he wouldn't do something stupid like kiss Mike and ruin their friendship forever. Mike had laid down next to him, his hand finding Will's.

"Thanks for letting me drag you along with me today so I didn't have to be a third wheel."

"Glad I could save you from such a horrendous fate. Especially with Dustin off at winter camp."

"Hey," Will had turned to look at Mike, only to find that Mike was already looking at him, "you saw first hand how coupley they were

being all day.” He puts on his best impression of Lucas, “*Max, the light of my life, I love you so much, let me kiss you for three hours straight, right in front of our friends.* ” They laugh for a moment. “Seriously though. Thank you. I had a lot of fun today.”

“Me too,” Will had said sincerely. “I’m really lucky you’re my best friend, Mike.”

He had grinned, despite the use of the word *friend* . Sure, he wanted to be more, but he was mostly just thrilled he’d had actually told Mike he was glad to be his friend. He’s never been very good at sharing how he feels, so the statement had made his insides feel all warm and fuzzy.

“Good, ‘cause you’ve got me forever,” Mike had told him, not entirely thinking about the implications of what he just promised.

“Forever,” Will had repeated softly. “I like the sound of that.”

Will wishes he had just kissed Mike right then and there, when they were fourteen years old and promising each other *forever* like that was something they had to offer.

Like they weren’t meant to be right-person-wrong-time star-crossed lovers in some overdramatic, poorly cast play. Like the stars could have aligned for them - two kids who spent most of their lives caught up in a world bigger than them, two kids who were raised knowing they would always be on opposite sides of things.

Maybe if he'd kissed Mike back then, he could've figured it all out beforehand, instead of letting everything slip through his fingers like a melting snowflake. Maybe, if he'd kissed Mike back then, they could have actually had a shot at forever.

-

The morning still comes, unfortunately, with Jonathan waking Will up to make sure he eats breakfast before he leaves.

He had been planning on skipping breakfast and sleeping in as long as possible - if only to avoid the dread settling in his body just a little while longer. But he drags himself out of bed and eats breakfast with his brother as quickly as he can, thinking maybe he could fall back asleep for twenty more minutes if he hurries.

That doesn't happen.

It takes less than ten minutes of being awake for Will's bones to start vibrating, and there's no way he's falling back asleep like this. He tells himself it's the cold making him shiver, but autumn has just begun.

He can lie to himself just fine.

-

Blunt force trauma. A lot of blunt force trauma. No idea what's happened to my hands, but it's probably not good. Fuck, please let me still have my hands after this.

Concussion?

Not sure, I might have a concussion.

Bruises everywhere, and every open wound on my body is probably full of dirt. Possible internal injuries. Bleeding from places that are only unmentionable because I'm talking about me.

A blessedly short but hellishly long time after getting rushed to the hospital, Will is told by a smiling doctor that he can leave in a few days. He's obviously not well enough to go back home right away. He'll still need some tests (and bills to cover his stay; ones they can't possibly afford.)

That's fine. That makes sense.

It's not like he expected to get pronounced fit with his wrists bandaged, his ring finger in a splint, two fingers on his left hand taped up, a couple

sutures on his scalp, the liquor just out of his system, high as fuck on pain killers, covered in butterfly stitches, cuts and bruises. Not bleeding internally, as far as anyone can tell.

Far as anyone can hope.

This is what he gets for sneaking out. He just wanted one night. One.

This is what happens when he lets go of himself.

The endless fucking shallow wounds are all over his body. He's still kind of surprised at how ugly some of it looks, especially the deeper stuff.

Not to mention that some of the stitches accidentally pulled out and wounds reopened. But really... he won't mention it.

When his mother and Jonathan come they're mortified. His mother cries. They curse at him - before holding him close.

The point is he understands.

Getting discharged doesn't mean he's as good as new.

What he's less okay with is the other thing. He's told the day before discharge, that apparently he's also going to have to see his schools guidance counselor in place of a therapist, as though this whole thing broke his brain instead of some fingers that didn't even need pins, and a few bruised ribs that'll be done healing in a couple of weeks.

He's not a "therapy" kind of guy, he's already figured that out, but he pushes the anger down when Jonathan gives him the news. His mom and brother are looking at him with concern in their eyes, and he gets exactly what they think. They think Will's gonna lose his shit.

But Will's head is just fine and everything else is numb as he says, "Sure. Yeah. Makes sense."

Jonathan gives him an encouraging smile and puts a hand on his shoulder. Will tenses and shrinks away under the touch without meaning to, his body screwing him all over again. Jonathan promptly removes his hand.

His face heats up, and a sharp pain runs through his hands. He hisses, "Ow, what the..."

Before he can even finish his muttered, frustrated question, Joyce is saying, in that mom voice Will's had to suffer on and off since he's been in the hospital, "Careful, Will. Don't clench your fists."

Predictably, that makes him want to punch something. He doesn't, obviously. That would involve clenching his fists, for one, and two, he has more self-control than that.

Will brought this on himself, considering the identity of his opponent.

Himself.

That, or it was all just some shitty coincidence. He doesn't know which one's worse.

He's pretty sure it's both.

His opponent laughs, because he knows what he wants, and it's not sense.

It's sensation, it's power, control, it's surrender.

It's Will, helpless.

The memory burns in his mind.

And, for the record, Will is okay.

Considering...

Will's first conscious thought is pain.

He is desperate for this to be over.

Wait , he's still doing it.

He almost wants to lose consciousness, but there's something in him that doesn't want to lose like this either.

Tap out or knock out. He's made his decision. This thing isn't gonna end with him out like a light.

But his decision doesn't matter.

His vision fades.

Tap out or knock out. Those are the rules.

Only it's not that kind of night.

It's not a night at all.

-

Death curls in his chest.

As quiet and patient as a well-fed cat, content to lie in wait.

It feels like an old friend.

An old lover, intimately familiar with his tattered heart inside and out.

He's known it in many forms, the aching grief.

Hot burn of sun, sand, dust, blood, pain.

Lungs filling with water *again and again and again* under distorted lights, shouts, shatters across senses.

Sharp agony sliding through skin, dirty and wrong, painted across taste buds and ticklish with each breath.

Misery pressed deep and coded into the very fibers and being of Will Byers.

He can feel it hiding underneath his skin, lying in wait, knotted and raw.

Death hums to him in the dark. The gentle hum of a mother to a grieving child.

It whispers to him secrets that he can't quite hear.

It exists in each exhale, climbing back in with every inhale, all ash and ice and sharp.

It is happy to have a home in his core and he recognizes it in the most abstract of senses, as a companion, and refuses to think too deeply about it. Thinking of it *invites* questions. Invites chaos.

Invites an undoing of all that he “knows” and “believes.”

Death observes him throughout life. Stills when it watches destruction unfold.

A shield of protection.

Shattering.

Annihilating foundations of trust.

Annihilating hope. Friendship. Possibility.

(So easily shredded to bloody bits, unrecognizable and horrifying.

No remorse.

No regret.

No hesitation.

Why was there no hesitation?

It's torture having a mind like his, forced to remember over and over,
an endless loop.)

Creating a prison of iron.

Body growing cold and alone.

But it doesn't bother him that his life is slipping away.

And in the press of cold as dead as the bones that feed the earth,
death whispers.

It calls. It promises. It pulls.

Death *sings*.

-

2. TALK TO PEOPLE!

“Well, well, well.” He recognizes the voice coming from behind him almost immediately upon hearing it. When he turns around it's just who he expects to see. Dustin Henderson.

Dustin Henderson is a fucking enigma. He's unpredictable in all ways.

One day he's on about running for student class president and the next he's throwing himself into research, trying to figure out how to legally own a Burmese Python in the state of Indiana. The campaign was popular among the students, to say the very least.

The club's newly elected president.

Will knew this was a bad idea. Too much exposure. Even to stand outside the auditorium during drama club is a risky move.

So, that being said, he doesn't understand how he got here. His legs moved and walked from all the way down the hall without his permission it seems. Will's thoughts are only now catching up with him. It's like a slap in the face all at once. Giving him extreme whiplash from the situation he's currently found himself in.

Then, Dustin pulls off his cap and mock bows, "If it isn't my old buddy *Will the Wise* . How are you doing, dude?"

Back then, Dustin tapped out. Smart of him.

He tapped out, and let Will go.

He's busy trying to figure out his next move with his mind scattered. Will struggles to put a cohesive sentence together, but manages a "yeah, good," before rubbing his neck nervously.

Dustin flashes one of his classic toothy smiles. (Once again - acting like nothing happened. Why is everyone acting like nothing happened?) His brown eyes switch between the wood doors behind him and Will. "You thinking about joining?"

Will just nods, feeling dazed and a bit queasy. "Maybe. But I'm not that great of an actor. It's more obligatory, actually."

"Oh." Dustin sighs, looking apologetic. "There's always the stage hand position. We could use you for sure," he says, smiling more than anyone at school should. Smiling more than anyone should after what happened between them. "Anyway. I should get back inside of there. They're probably dying without me. See you round?"

"Sure."

It's a lie.

-

This sensation it's... foreign.

There is a soft humming crooning at the base of his skull.

It begins as a pinpoint dead center of his chest, spiralling outward leisurely.

Confused.

The humming shifts to the faint impression of words.

Mine.

He finally puts a word to sensation.

Warmth.

The crooning grows.

Come back.

He doesn't want to. Just let him sleep in peace.

Fix it.

The molten heat floods his veins and it *burns* .

-

There are a lot of things that piss Will off.

People who chew with their mouths open.

When the package of scissors needs fuckin' scissors.

His father. Pretending like he actually cares, just for money.

All of those things suck the life out of him like the little mosquitoes that buzz around on a camping trip.

Moments like those were what built him into the person he'd become.

Moments like those were what showed him the world would never be kind, not like the little books Nancy - another person in his childhood that eventually got tired of him - sometimes would read to him on the playground, behind the monkey bars.

Moments like those proved to him that he had never been more than a tiny speck on this planet. Compared to the vastness of the universe.

The house was never silent - someone was always screaming, bottles were always smashing. From the start, Joyce had told him to stay in his room with Jonathan, never to interfere, it was for his own safety.

Sometimes it was kill or be killed.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

“Shit!”

Will’s head snaps up at the frustrated sound, frowning. At the exclamation, though, his hand slips and he loses the sheet, slipping back into the water.

And there’s Lucas Sinclair who by the looks of things has decided to empty his entire backpack out on the floor of the darkroom. He’s repeating, “Shit, shit, shit, shit,” over and over to himself.

“*I love you,*” Mike tells him, head in Will’s lap and hands gently folded over his chest and completely and totally oblivious to the fact that he’d just rocked Will Byers’ world.

His initial reaction is that Mike is joking—he *must* be joking. This is Mike Wheeler, the boy he’s known ever since kindergarten, and he says shit like this all the time— *except he doesn’t*.

Even Will wouldn’t joke about something like that.

His fingers are in Mike’s hair, and Will’s eyes are fixed on his relaxed face and he realizes he’s so not prepared for this. There is no way he could be prepared for this, obviously, because he’s cuddling with his best friend and *I love you* is ringing in his ears.

He takes in a deep breath, slow and measured, fights down the

tightness clinging at his ribcage, climbing higher to tug at his throat. He sorts through words and strings sentences together and manages to say, voice remarkably normal:

"No, you don't."

Mike doesn't even open his eyes, just hums a little under his breath. *"Yeah,"* he says, *"yeah, I do."*

His face is soft, eyes closed and his breath is coming out in an easy flow that Will can't even begin to imagine mimicking right now.

"I love you." Mike says again, just in case Will hadn't heard the first time or something, and Will has always thought your heart was meant to beat out of your chest when this sort of thing happens, but it feels like it stopped the moment started Mike talking. His fingers are frozen, tangled in locks of dark raven hair, and his mouth is going dry from the way it hangs open.

Please, Will wants to say. Don't say it like that.

Mike rolls over in his lap, arms folding up on Will's knee and his chin coming to rest on his wrist. His eyes are open now, and if there was any doubt that this was all some elaborate prank it's blown away by the way Mike is looking at him.

(Mike is shaking too; a slight up-and-down tremor that chases its way around his shoulders and down to shiver past his spine.

Will doesn't know why he didn't see that earlier.)

"I..." Will closes his mouth, swallows, and whatever sentence he's been trying to say falls between them to splinter messily.

Mike smiles at him, but it's eight parts self-deprecation to two parts dry humor. "It's okay," he says. "I know."

Will jams his eyes shut and hates himself. He fumbles around blindly for a moment until his fingers hit Mike's and he's able to press their sweaty palms together.

He squeezes so hard that he almost feels something break and Mike's fingers tremble against his.

I'm sorry, he thinks.

"I'm sorry," Mike says.

They don't bring it up again.

If there's a need to speak of it, Will can't find it. They act exactly as they always have. Mike is his overbearing best friend who never quite learns the meaning of personal space and Will is the long-suffering rational parental figure in his life that sometimes pretends

not to notice if, occasionally, Mike stares at him with his eyes wide and unreadable.

They settle into routine.

They meet up in the morning, separate for their classes and meet up again at lunch with the party (and Eleanor.)

They cycle home together. Mike comes over sometimes.

Nothing changes.

Nothing changes, and Will can breathe.

Trouble hits a few weeks later and Will thinks he should have seen it coming.

Will knows what the lines on Mike's face mean when he's trying not to frown, knows when Mike's lying to him and he spends night after night staring at his ceiling—wishing that he could get up and drag himself away into the cool three am air.

(Sometimes he catches Mike in a lie, but sometimes Mike talks around him; wiggles the truth in there somewhere and Will doesn't know what's real until he sees him the next morning with bags under his eyes and a slight limp to his step.)

The more Mike pretends like he never said *it* , Will does it. Stupid shit. The not sleeping, the overthinking, the forgetting to eat unless one of his friends shoves something in his face.

The party, and even El notices it, they walk around them like they think one of them is going to snap at any moment but they can't figure out who.

September 23rd, 1988

Today isn't one of his bad days. Not by any standard. But Will can't quite shake the feeling that something is going to happen. What - he doesn't know.

His mother hands him a thermostat of coffee and gently shoves him out the front door. He ate breakfast before leaving. It didn't come back up immediately, which on most days is a miracle in itself.

Jonathan reluctantly tells him he can use his car to get to school. So that's what he's doing. Going to school.

But first, he has to pick up Eleanor. His mom made him promise to. She even called their house to let them know Will is coming. He sees Chief Hopper - "*Hop*" as Joyce calls him, which is still disgusting from all sides - in the doorway, and he gives Will a curt nod and a wave. He kindly returns the gesture. El doesn't say much as she gets in the car, just a friendly *hey* and *how are you?*

It's not much out of the ordinary for them. They've never crossed the bridge of *actual* talking. Occasionally bouncing words off each other all the way back in middle school. They're parents know each other - so they're obligated to get along for their sake. It's nothing more than that in Will's eyes.

Her hair is big, because it's full of secrets, to match whatever latest fashion trend she's found in a tabloid magazine. And yet, El always sets her own pace. She's a self proclaimed weirdo. She's unapologetic about it, too, something he wishes he could be. Will just doesn't have the guts.

He doesn't notice right away that El is eyeing him with that shrewd look, but shuffles his weight uneasily at the scrutiny, hands on the wheel. "What?" he asks, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Mike Wheeler... he likes you."

It's the way she says it so casually that really gets to him. Like that isn't wrong on so many levels. She must be joking. Or she knows. He doesn't know which one would be worse. This could just be her way of making a mockery of him.

Stop it, Will doesn't say. That's not fair.

Because what else is he supposed to think?

She won't stop staring. It's infuriating. It makes him feel foreign in his own skin. "*Mike Wheeler*," she repeats, like she knows his brain is short circuiting, glitching, and stuttering. "Our Mike? He likes you."

Our.

The world shakes.

"Your boyfriend told you that?" His voice is void of any sort of emotion whatsoever. Something he has perfected after years of practice, lying through his teeth so everyone can just give him what he wants - to finally leave him alone.

El twists her whole body at him. "He's not my boyfriend and hasn't been since middle school."

Will's knuckles are burning white on the steering wheel, and he can't bring himself to look her in the face. If he does he just might crumble under the pressure. "...Max and Lucas are still going."

"They break up ten times every month. And besides they're- it's different. Just. *Trust* me."

Okay. Now he's positive she's lying to him. She knows and this is some sort of sick joke.

They look like they have one of those so called "friendships"

revolving around one person. And one person alone. He isn't so sure El would even put up with him otherwise.

"Why-" her voice chokes and dies in her throat, *"why do you hate me so much? What did I ever do to you?"*

Hell, he didn't expect *that*.

Their eyes meet squarely, each set burning.

"I don't-" he pauses. "I don't hate you." Because it's the truth. He doesn't. His voice grows softer with this statement.

Will is starting to realize that this is the longest they've ever held a conversation.

Then she says, folding her arms across her chest, a little snappish, and hurt, "Yes, you do. You're still holding onto a four year grudge." She does no more than frown.

He's not holding onto a grudge. He really isn't.

Will rolls his eyes. "Why do you even care?"

Her response is easy as ever. "Because *I'm your friend.*"

He can tell she doesn't think he fully understands, but she does see his eyes go impossibly soft when she calls herself his friend.

She means it.

Will thinks that he would have something else to say after that, thinks that El would have something to say as well. But his mind can't seem to locate the words he needs at the moment, the only words left to stay afloat in this shipwreck that is his thoughts are the words *I'm your friend*.

I'm your friend. I'm your friend. I'm your friend.

El pauses for a long while, then tacks on, "It depends entirely on who you think I am to you."

Checkmate.

As they continue on their way, Will's jaw is clenched in silence, and he begins to ponder in earnest - *who is Eleanor Hopper to me?*

Will would never be able to admit how unsettling it is that El of all people managed to get to him. And so he finds himself in a perplexing predicament - is their friendship actually heading down the right direction or is it unpredictably swerving down a more perilous path?

The rest of the time El hangs back, saying nothing else outright. But the particular look she gives him is enough, a gaze that does not abound in pity, but one that says *'you are permitted to feel what you need to feel.'*

Of course, Will chooses defiance, and seeks out to hide his emotions.

He wants to retaliate, his prior desire of seeking a collision with El has been startled awake and he wants to rip himself by the seams, to open himself up and let her see just how capable he is of being unbearable. Yet Will is silent, and entirely unsure of what emotions are stirring inside of him.

Is he still battling his worst fears? Is it this the combined burden of internal and external pressure? Or is it pure guilt? A level he has to weigh? An act of contrition?

They ride the rest of the way to school in silence, so much left unsaid between the two.

El's words echo in his head long after they part ways.

Deja vu has always been an interesting feeling. Feeling as if the same day, hour, minute has happened before; it'd be enough to send anyone's thoughts reeling. Plus a few recurring trips down memory lane, and it's as if the passage of time is all you can even think about anymore.

Would things be different if you were aware?

What would you change if you could be?

Whether things will be different or not, it will always circle back around. It starts with a fight, there's some distance in between, and it always ends with a storm.

Will is in the midst of removing a photograph from its water rinse, but stands frozen now. The *drip-drop* of the water falling into the tray is the only audible sound in the otherwise silent room.

As the timer annoyingly beeps, he clears his throat.

He sets the dripping photo facedown on another tray to wipe the excess water away, and gathers up the photos on the table in silence.

“Shit!”

Will's head snaps up at the frustrated sound, frowning. At the exclamation, though, his hand slips and he loses the sheet, slipping back into the water.

And there's Lucas Sinclair who by the looks of things has decided to empty his entire backpack out on the floor of the darkroom. He's

repeating, “*Shit, shit, shit, shit,*” over and over to himself.

“*Lucas?*” Will asks, in, okay, maybe not his best ‘friendly’ voice.

Lucas jumps, then looks up. “Will?”

He sighs. “Could you close the door? I don’t exactly want all my paper getting light exposed.” It maybe comes out a little harsher than Will intended, which would be another reason, he’s not exactly a people person.

Lucas turns, closing the door and gesturing with a nod of his head.

“Sorry.”

He raises an eyebrow at Will, “Dude, I’m going to not take offense to that because I know how expensive that shit is, and I left mine at home, so that’s like, a twenty minute walk and then twenty minutes back and then there’d only be like ten minutes left before school ends and I don’t want to have to get all the chemicals myself. I can pay you even though it sucks that I had some already, and it’s expensive, but maybe I could-”

“Lucas.” Will stops his roll and offers a solution. “You can use mine.”

Instead of looking ashamed, he simply crouches down, picking up the mess on the floor. “Thanks a bunch. You’re a lifesaver.”

“No problem. Do you need help?”

Lucas looks up at him intently, nodding, and interjecting with questions that make it obvious he probably actually knows way more than Will initially gave him credit for.

There are photos in the *no pile* , but he needs to narrow it down to around five or six. He inspects each photograph with a critical eye, and before long, he gets through half of the photos. He has seven *definitely's*.

Once they're halfway done, Will asks, “Do you still need my help?”

“One more for old time’s sake?” Lucas grins.

There’s something about Lucas's grin that makes Will want to smile back. He represses it, and moves to Lucas's side to show him again.

A few more times, until the assignment is done, for good measure.

“Oh, wow, I think school finished a while ago.” Will nods up at the clock as they emerge from the darkroom, blinking owlishly.

“Shit. You have all your stuff, right?” An hour and Lucas's company has simultaneously been slightly okay and also extremely frustrating.

“Yeah. Am I gonna get you in trouble?” Will kind of sounds like he doesn’t care so much about getting Lucas in trouble.

“Nah, it’ll be okay. You need a ride home?”

“Uh, no, it's fine.”

“It’s not safe.”

“You’re *right* . Hawkins is *crawling* with criminals,” he says sarcastically. “Some crazy old guy could flash me.”

Lucas huffs out a laugh. “I’m driving you home, weirdo.”

Once they get to the car, parked in the lot, he tosses his backpack in the back seat and slides into the front.

There’s an awkward silence for a couple of minutes as they turn down main street. Lucas isn’t going to let it stand, though. He chats with Will all the way through Old Cherry Road, finally slowing when they pull up in front of the dark, dreary house.

Lucas holds out a hand, apparently for a fist bump, and Will accepts before turning to go up the porch steps.

He avoids El like the plague. He is, also, on high alert at school for any possible run-ins with anyone else. He's seen *way* too many people in the short span of two weeks.

He dances around her with muscles and bones that twitch and writhe.

His mind is blank. Safer that way.

Don't think, don't think, *don't think*.

Survive.

One foot in front of the other, he moves on autopilot.

Don't think, *just do* .

Left foot, right foot.

Halfway through his morning run, something feels-

Wrong.

It's not pain, exactly, that makes him slow to a stop outside the corner store, but something sweeping and uncomfortable. The sensation of falling while standing completely still. The hyper awareness of his sweat sheened skin.

Will seems fine. He *is* fine. He's just... on *edge* .

But, *yeah* , he's fine.

Will is *perfectly* fine.

He finds himself sitting by the quarry. Legs dangling. Just one wrong move and he could fall to his death.

He's sitting on the rock thinking about... what was he thinking about again?

Was it about picking up his meds?

Maybe it was that.

But Will can't remember now as he looks down and stares at the water. Wondering how long it would take before his bones would shatter if he jumped.

But why is he always thinking of things like that now?

Is it because he can't remember why he came out here to think in the first place?

Or is it possibly because he's distracting himself from *who's* coming into his life.

This is different. This is new.

Will feels his gut twist.

"Fuck..." He whispers and tries to think of something else other than Mike Wheeler's cloudy eyes that have come back to haunt him for the tenth time today. Will hates that he was the one to say goodbye.

It's all *his* fault. The blame falls on him.

But Will can't express that anger into stares or words. And maybe that is what truly angers him as he sits on the rock and tries to think of nothing and no one.

(Certainly *not* Eleanor Hopper. Who is finally coming into his life slowly but surely.)

But his childhood friend always seems to come to mind when he constantly tries to push him out.

Why is that?

He has...

...no idea at all...

"You weren't lying." Will says, lowly, as they walk through the school hallway. His mission failed as soon as third period finished and El spotted him in the hallway. But he accepted the defeat, although reluctantly.

"There's no reason for me to lie," she answers. Then while looking straight at Will, she says, *"Especially not to you."*

Undoubtedly, Eleanor's degree of disarming sincerity will take some getting used to.

She assures Will: "I'm your friend, remember?"

"Can I ask you a question? Why did you say it like that?" Will begins. *"I'm your friend."* Why did you choose to say it the way that you did?"

“What do you mean?”

“You could have said, *you’re my friend*,” he continues. “But instead you said it the other way around.”

A pause. “Maybe I felt like it would be rude to say it the other way around.” She shrugs. “ *You’re my friend*. It sounds like I claimed you or something without your agreement. So instead, I’d thought I’d give you the comfort of letting you know that I’ve offered myself to be a friend to you.”

Then Will, chest light and heavy at the same time and incredibly perplexed as to how it’s able to be both at once, says, “Do you really want to be friends with me of *all people*?”

She grins. He thinks it's the first he's ever seen her genuinely smiling. He's sure Mike has seen that a lot. “ *Obviously*. Everyone else in this town is boring.”

He furrows a brow. “Everyone?”

The bell rings. Kids scramble to get to their assigned classes. El breezes past his question, and says with an air of confidence, “We’re friends.” Before turning down the hall and out of his line of sight.

We’re friends. We’re friends. We’re friends. Will says it in his head three

times in a row.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

There's probably a dramatic irony in how many thoughts are popcornning around in Will's head but every time he sees that stupid beautiful face, he thinks about kissing him until he runs out of air, and his thought-popcorn turns into thought-lava, and he really can't afford to lose the last bit of sense in him.

(Popcorn, lava, doomsday-level hurricane, et cetera...)

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh to be in high school. I don't miss it.

Thank you all for your patience and I hope you enjoy this chapter!

1. *Make friends (your age, your guidance counselor DOESN'T count!)*

That singular incident had unknowingly opened a sort of Pandora's box which Will had definitely not been prepared to navigate through.

Even in employing caution, it had served more than anything to unravel all of his self-proclaimed "*proficiency*," in finding the optimal equilibrium to be both in secret and to be himself in the open with her. *Only* with her.

Eleanor Hopper has wedged herself in his life, her presence undoing with relative ease all that Will had painstakingly built while presenting an obstacle - fully discerning himself with the others. It

feels sort of unfair, that El is able to be so brazen yet he's left completely in the dark.

It depends entirely on who you think I am to you.

I'm your friend.

He thinks he's going to go mad, and for reasons which will probably take him a lifetime to understand.

But as soon as the reality of their friendship sharpens into focus, he can come to willingly abandon his quest to try and piece together El - who is now his *friend*.

"Coffee?" El grimaces and hands the thermostat back to him. Then proceeds to continue on. "I don't know how you plan on spending more time with the dullest woman alive. God, that was the *longest* conversation of my life."

Will's shoes scuff on the sidewalk as they walk. "I think all guidance counselors are supposed to be boring. It's their job."

(*"Life throws some serious curveballs at both the best and worst of times, Will," Mrs. Chaundey notes and tosses her empty drink underhand the desk into the bin. "You've grown because you had to, but ultimately what you grew into was your choice alone."*)

She smiles that vague grin and shoves at his shoulder a little too hard to be considered playful. "Is it yours too?"

He responds with his hands up in mock-offense. "Wow. Thanks, El. I appreciate it."

"No problem, Byers. Because I'm having a great time."

Will laughs at the dry sarcasm. He doesn't reply to the comment but can see her with his peripheral looking between him and the sidewalk ahead.

When they had first become friends, or the weird, quasi-friends that they had been, Will largely accepted a role in hearing El rant. In the early days, El had ranted a lot. She'd fly off on tangents, long-winded and dramatic, about whatever was bothering her most.

Now, Will revisits events in her own life like old television episodes. He knows everything. He probably knows everything about her which is hilarious given the fact how little he *really* knows about El's life before moving to Hawkins those four years ago.

They had a fledgling friendship - the kind where they exchanged silent laughs when someone said something dumb in class and made shy eye contact whenever they needed to pick partners for an English project.

But Will has nothing to tell her. He's been so out of the loop that he

hadn't even realized she and Mike were broken up. For Three years at that.

They're mostly quiet the rest of the walk home. Leaves rustle above them and the sun hidden behind clouds fights it's way to shine valiantly. Will is staring down at his shoes, hands stuffed in his pockets, the October breeze seeping through and chilling his bones.

He's trying not to look but sometimes it feels impossible to ignore the siren call that is Eleanor Hopper. As strange as it is.

He's thinking so hard, it's written across his face in the downturn of his lips, the muscle jumping in his jaw and the furled eyebrows.

Will doesn't have to wait long for El to talk.

First period Chemistry is his idea of a nightmare. Try as he might, none of the math makes any goddamn sense. Will bites his lower lip as he struggles at the formulas in front of him. There's no way in hell he's going to make it through this semester in one piece.

He doodles in the margins of his page, his mind wandering. Will had loved school when he was younger, especially English. He was the kind of kid who could pick up a book and read the entire thing in a day. Now, he can't remember the last time he had picked up something for fun.

"One minute."

The teacher's warning brings him back to the present, where his anxiety rages and his test is nearly blank. Will turns the paper over. Might as well fold; he can't pull these answers out of his ass if his life depended on it.

When the bell rings he takes off, not caring if he would get trouble for running in the halls.

The axe has to fall eventually, and he wants to avoid it as long as possible.

"Mr. Wheeler." The Chemistry teacher, Mrs. Ambrose, stops him at the end of class; once everyone has already left, packed up and are heading to their next block of classes.

Mike frowns. His head is pounding and his stomach still feels precarious after last night's adventure. The exhaustion leaks into his pores. The last thing he wants is a lecture about not paying attention. "Yeah?" He says to Mrs. Ambrose, hoping the teacher doesn't hear the sour note in his tone.

She has one hand on her hip, looking at him through her thick black glasses. "It's about Will Byers."

"What about him?" Mike asks, his palms starting to sweat.

“He’s not doing so well. I was wondering — even though you two aren’t in the exact same class this semester — if you would be willing to tutor him.”

“Uhm.” He can hardly believe his luck. “Ok— Yeah. Sure. Of course.”

“Excellent. Be sure to let him know.”

“Okay.” The bell rings for his next class and Mike grabs his backpack. “I better go,” he says to himself, floating down the hallway in a daze.

It isn’t until he’s sitting in fifth period History that it hits him: he’s going to have to spend an extended amount of time with Will, and not make a fool of himself.

Except Mike feels something less like hopeless but maybe, possibly, just a tiny sliver of hope—a way to fix things.

A tall order if he had ever heard one.

Misfortune seems to have a penchant for striking hot just when balance has been attained.

Will is picking at his tater tots in the cafeteria, in one of the back round tables, alone, and tucked into a corner away from most of the noise, when Mike approaches him.

“Hi.” He says casually, holding onto his red lunch tray in front of him.

And of fucking course – it’s Mike *his childhood best friend who he’s had an almost unbearable crush on since forever* Wheeler.

Alert, alert. All systems shut-down. Air traffic warning — you may be encountering flying pigs.

Will watches the subtle expression on Mike’s face. For someone who regularly made such theatrical shows of disinterest, he had always approached everything with a quiet, immovable determination. Sometimes it was impossible to know what he wanted until he already had it.

Will’s head is pounding, each breath rattles distressingly in his chest and he can’t seem to stop his hands from trembling.

Mike’s eyes tick up to meet Will’s, and he feels a sudden jolt in his stomach. Will has spent so much time looking anywhere but at other people’s faces that it was easy to forget the distinctive mahogany shade of his eyes. And Will is instantly like a deer caught in the headlights.

This isn’t happening, this isn’t happening, this isn’t happening. Because maybe if he chants it enough it’ll come true.

He sees more of the party in the halls, but it's been a long time since he's seen them as a unit, as *the party* . He also sees less of Mike. Interestingly enough, Will has no idea how he'd fully managed to drift away from them, but he did. Yet even with Will '*drifting*' a little, Mike was still a major dilemma as ever.

And this is already more awkward than he could have, almost, expected.

Will curls an eyebrow up. "What?" he asks, nerves, seemingly, lit on fire, and bones jangling in a way that can't possibly be healthy. He makes a mental note to stop by the library and find out how much pressure it takes to strain your jaw muscle. "Do you need something?"

Will thinks about bees being more afraid of you than you are of them, and how if you ignore them long enough, they'll go away on their own. He gives Mike a look he normally reserves for his mother or Jonathan in their overbearingly annoying moments.

The twinges of guilt he would get about how things went down with everyone would occupy his mind sometimes, but as time went on, and years passed, he learned to stop beating himself up for it. Mike moved on quicker than he expected, but somewhere, deep down, it warmed Will to see. He's a good guy; he deserves to be happy.

There's probably a dramatic irony in how many thoughts are popcornning around in Will's head but every time he sees that stupid beautiful face, he thinks about kissing him until he runs out of air, and his thought-popcorn turns into thought-lava, and he really can't afford to lose the last bit of sense in him.

(Popcorn, lava, doomsday-level hurricane, et cetera...)

It's bitter and it's sweet at the same time. Cherries and copper. Van Gogh and paintings. And suffering.

Suffering. Suffocating. Downpour. Rain water, tsunamis, shattered glass.

He likes the rain but resents it at the same time and that doesn't really make a lot of sense but nothing ever does anyway. He likes the way that rain rhymes with *pain* . He likes the comfort of steady downfall on sun-kissed skin.

But it always lasts just a smidgeon too long and the rain turns into a tsunami that fills his lungs and rips him apart from limb to limb and batters him down to the ground until he is nothing but dust and shattered glass with all the pieces pointing out. And then it's no longer beautiful. It's an Edgar Allan Poe poem written about a Van Gogh painting and it's no longer beautiful. It's fucking tragic.

He knew that it was all evanescent, and it was only a matter of time before it all came crashing down, dragging him down to the bottom of the ocean.

But Will never tried to gasp for air, never tried to claw at the surface or keep himself from sinking all the way down. He let himself jump straight into the water and beneath the rogue waves. He let himself be split open by it. And that's the problem with diving feet first. Your

heart gets submerged before your brain does. And once you're under, that's it.

He let himself get submerged. He's learnt to drink it out of the salty sea. And it'll make him sick even more until all he's left with is stomach aches and dry throats and blood and copper and sadness.

They say that Van Gogh wasn't appreciated in his time. That he lived in poverty and squalor, that he lived in misery. That he drank and smoked until his pain felt like butterflies. That he drank straight absinthe until his intestines deteriorated. That he used to eat yellow paint to make him happy. They say that he only sold one painting in his entire life.

People thought he was insane. He probably was.

And now, Will finally understands why Van Gogh cut off his ear. Suffering feels religious if you do it right.

"Are you just gonna stand there all day?" His own voice is like an icicle poking right between his shoulder blades; as he forces himself to look back up, arms crossed tightly over his chest as he anticipates Mike's reaction. Whatever it could be.

Mike looks a little disheartened at Will's harsh tone, like a puppy. "...Can we talk?" Mike's stupid beautiful eyes are bigger and browner than ever as he has them trained on Will. Then this fool just stands there, looking at Will. And man is he a sight for sore eyes. He pushes his hair back, albeit making his face properly visible now.

Mike's maker had won. Definitely.

No icicle this time; just a bucket of freezing cold water dumped over his head. Mike's voice sounds tired, but Will can tell he's trying not to be, lacing his voice and hiding it, and it exactly matches up perfectly with how sad *and* tired Will's insides feel and he hates it. He hates all of it, hates it so much.

But he stops—doesn't turn away, just sideways—and allows Mike eye contact. "Why?"

"Mrs. Ambrose talked to me after class—"

"Oh Christ." Will mutters under his breath.

"She said you were struggling and suggested maybe I help you?"

Will crosses his arms over his chest. He is failing Chemistry, and if he doesn't work on it, he'll be stuck in summer school. Still, the injury to his pride stings. "Like a tutoring thing," he says flatly.

"Yeah. I mean, only if you want to."

He rolls his eyes, keeps his face blank and unimpressed, but inside his heart is pounding faster than ever before. "I think I can handle..."

Chemistry on my own.”

“Never said you couldn’t.” Mike replies quickly, realizing his fault. “But,” he shrugs a shoulder up, “the offer’s on the table.”

The last test, with a big fat F on the front, is still in his book bag, waiting to be signed by his mother. He’d have to see the disappointed look in her eyes when she found out. But if he had a tutor, that all might be mitigated...

“Okay,” he agrees, not thinking about what this really means in terms of... *talking*. “I need help with my homework. Don’t go spreading that around.”

“I won’t.” Mike promises. “Do you want me to come over to your place or—”

“Sure.” Will shrugs. “Is tomorrow fine? Around six?”

“6 is fine.” The bell rings and Mike starts making his way towards the dumpster to throw out his lunch. “See you later,” Mike tells him, and Will waves non committedly, and a bit, definitely awkwardly, in an odd daze. He has some thinking to do.

There’s something comforting about the store at the edge of town, the shitty store he managed to get a job at. The familiar fluorescent lights, scuffed floors, hot dogs rotating on a cooker. Will heads to the back, filling up a plastic cup he snagged from beneath the counter

with Diet Coke. He can't shake the jittery sensation that makes him feel as though he's gasping for air.

Try as he might, he can't get Mike Wheeler out of his mind. There is something incredibly endearing about his awkwardness; the way he approaches the world in a completely different manner than Will. Unjaded and wide eyed. Why Mike willingly wants to spend time with a screw-up like him doesn't make a lot of sense. Yet he's taking time out of his week to tutor Will.

Frankly he isn't sure if he should be flattered or insulted by that—the ugly part of his mind, the one that counts his bones, tells him it's all an elaborate prank of some sort to humiliate him further. There is no way he can win against the part that screams his flaws 24/7.

“Will.” El taps him on the shoulder from behind, and he startles, jolting.

“Jesus. How many times do I have to tell you not to sneak up on me like that?”

“A million and one.” She pulls a pack of Bubble gum out of her teal hoodie pocket and pops a piece into her mouth. Then, she asks the burning question. The one she's been wanting to ask the entire walk from school to the convenience store. Will could tell just by the look on her face. “What did Wheeler want with you at lunch?”

Will sighs, preparing himself for the question, but still not quite looking at her and that stupid smirk now plastered on her face. “He's going to tutor me. Apparently, I need all the help I can get.” He ends

his sentence with an emphatic roll of the eyes.

“ *Aw, how cliche* ,” she says sarcastically. “I’m telling you; he’s got it bad.”

Will gives her a pointed look. “I doubt that severely.”

She ignores the statement and instead nudges him slyly. “So what are you gonna wear for your date?”

“It’s not a date.” He huffs. “He’s just... helping me out with some homework.”

El blows a bubble and pops it. She stalks her eyes across the glass window and they both see Hopper’s beige cop car bustling through down the road. Then after a comfortable twenty seconds, making a pit stop in the parking lot. “I’m sure. Well, see you tomorrow.”

“See ya.”

“Don’t forget to call me for all the juicy deets.”

Will puts his hands in his hoodie pockets, looking at her flatly. “Not much to tell but if you want a play by play.”

“ Always .”

Mike had seen how his face fell when Will saw him. Another instance of him putting his damn foot in his mouth.

Still, it's hard to go to Hawkins High and not notice him.

Rumors swell, of course, they'd always had to a certain extent. That he's a Satanist, that he gets around, that his dad had gotten murdered, his mother's been on edge for years, and his brother is a freak and a failure. Mike knows, or at least used to know those things aren't true.

The rumors are bullshit, and as far as Mike is concerned underneath those dark and broody eyes Will looks vulnerable more than anything. Delicate.

Mike looks at his alarm clock. It's 9:14 pm. He can, conceivably, go out and be home by midnight. By the sound of the romantic oldies coming from the bathroom, his mom is having her “me-time” in the bathtub. And he'd bet twenty bucks that his dad is asleep on the Lay-Z-Boy in the living room, the muffled sound of the TV filling up the space.

He opens the sash to his window and shimmies out, landing on the dirt with a loud thump. Shit. This is gonna be harder than he thought.

Notes for the Chapter:

Let me know what you think of this! Favourite parts?
Predictions? Suggestions? I'd love to hear any and all
of your thoughts <3.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

"Whatever, Mike thinks, scrubbing at his eyes with balled up fists, as though that will clean his mind. He can't think about Will, he can't think about the shame in Will's eyes when he admitted he knew the party saw, in their old middle school lunchroom all those years ago, or the fear in his shaky voice.

He can't think about any of that, because Hopper is frowning at him, eyes skating between him and the road."

Notes for the Chapter:

And thus, tutoring commences.

Joyce is tapping on the steering wheel when Will hops into the front seat—her nervous habit. Something is stressing her, and he can tell, plain as day.

"How was school?" She asks after a long while of companionable silence as they bustle down the road.

"Fine." As much as he tries to push it away, there's always that illogical resentment between the two of them—at least on Will's end. Not to say that he doesn't love his mother or appreciates everything she had to go through for him and Jonathan but sometimes she can be a bit of a smother.

"Just - fine?" Her tapping on the wheel has stopped, and Will finds he misses it. He never thought he'd miss something so loud. He wishes his heart would stop thumping so loud in his ears, but it persists.

“Yeah, fine.” He stares out the window at the cornfields, chewing on his fingernails. He knows he has to break the news to her eventually. “So, Mom I...”

“You what?” If there was one thing about Joyce Katherine Byers it's that she isn't well known around town for her patience.

“I haven't been doing well in Chemistry. I'm failing,” hoping the quick words would muffle the blow he says it rushedly.

She looks at him, brows pinched, and lips pressed into a tight line. And there's the disappointment. He can see how she started gripping the steering wheel now; as they bound down country roads. “Why didn't you tell me?” But her voice is still soft—ripe with genuine understanding.

He internally winces. “I dunno. But um, I just wanted to let you know someone offered to tutor me. I figured he could come over.”

“He?” She rubs at her temple, eyes darting back and forth—between Will and the open road ahead.

“Mike,” he says quickly. He just knows she's going to make a big deal of it. Or worse she'll think the two are friends again. “*Just* to help me with homework.” he adds.

Contrary to what Will previously thought, Joyce simply nods out her response, a little hesitant. “Will?” His mother is now saying, and it takes Will a minute to realise the car has stopped moving and the radio has cut out completely.

They’re parked in the driveway, and she’s staring at Will like he’s a broken toy she doesn’t know how to deal with. Change the wiring, maybe? New batteries? If only it were that easy.

Will smiles, trying to ease the tension, but it only makes his mother look more uneasy, twisting back in her seat and clearing her throat. Will tugs at the car door and pulls himself out, grateful for the fresh air.

Joyce watches as her son bounds into the house with more cheer than he’s had in months and can’t help but wonder what exactly about seeing Mike Wheeler puts him in good spirits.

Though she has the very beginnings of an idea.

“Will!” His mother calls from the living room.

“In a minute,” he snaps.

Mike Wheeler can fucking wait, because Will staying in his room, for as long as possible, hoping all this weirdness can just fizzle out and die.

And he gets it. Jonathan (of all people) told him years ago: “Will, you’re being ridiculous, love exists. You haven’t found the right person yet.” or his personal favorite to eyeroll at: “Love is more than just sex.”

The truth is, love is shitty, gross, and a complete waste of time.

He’s learned that the hard way. Between observations with his own parents at the ripe age of five years old and the shitty “highschool sweetheart” relationships he’s seen throughout the years. He’s discovered that “true love” doesn’t really hold any value. It isn’t real.

He can lie just fine and tell himself these things, because right now, it’s the one thing he has complete control over.

Another shout. This time it’s both Hopper’s and his mother’s impatient voices meshed together. “Will!”

Hopper had stopped by after his policing, for the day, was done, without El, which Will thanked the heavens for. He definitely doesn’t need her whispering absurd shit in his ear every ten seconds. He doesn’t need her giving him some sort of weird sense of hope. And his brother is probably at work or with some old friends from highschool that ended up not going away for college as-well.

“Coming!” He yells, and opens the door.

Mike stands in the living room, making some kind of awkward small talk with Hopper and Joyce. He's very clearly uncomfortable, his hands are in his hoodie pockets, bookbag at his feet. Will rubs at his eyes, but the image does not fade. Rationally, he knows it's real.

Mike startles, looking to Will as though he's just realised he was there. Will does not look back, keeping his eyes focused on his mother and Hopper instead.

"Hi, Will." When he looks he notices the tops of Mike's ears are red.

Will feels his soul drop out of his body right then and there.

"Hi," Will echoes back, embarrassed by the sudden pit in his stomach. He wants so badly to sink into the floorboards and never show his face again. Every part of him feels swelteringly hot and clammy.

And that was all that was said until they walked down the hall and reached Will's room. He forgot to clean up, and the mess reflects that. He kicks an empty takeout carton into the closet trying to be as discreet as possible; well, as discreet you can be when kicking an old takeout carton.

Will sat on the edge of his bed, lowering his voice. "Sorry," the tone is casual but his stomach is knotting. Shit, shit, shit. He always causes more damage. Why is he like this?

Mike waves him off, “don’t worry about it. It’s fine, really.” Mike is standing in front of him like he’s too nervous to sit.

Great. This is already starting off on a high note.

“Um... you can sit down if you want.” He indicates towards the bed.

“Right. Sure. Okay.” Is he imagining it or is Mike’s hands shaking as he sits down and pulls the textbook from his bag? “The homework is on page 56.”

And so for the next hour, with patience, he began to untangle Chemistry with Will. Mike has a way of explaining concepts slowly so that they make sense. The tutoring session goes better—a lot better than Will expects.

He doesn’t do great at first. He flies through some of them based on memory but by then most of the problems are too difficult to figure out. He doesn’t really know what they’re asking. Mike nudges him to continue, trying only to drop hints every once in a while. Being with Mike is easy, it always has been easy. He doesn’t deserve that.

But it’s never enough to get Will anywhere close to the correct answer and his brain really starts to hurt after struggling through a few.

“This one is supposed to be tricky. I’m the asshole who wrote it so...” Mike smiles like he actually cares not just because he’s tutoring and

it's his job. "You okay?" Mike asks distantly, leaning towards Will with a careful concern. Will can hear the voice swimming in his ears, feel his own breath in his head, but still he nods.

He's fine.

He's fine.

Not in a while. Never.

"I'm fine."

Will takes a mental picture. The sight is enough to somewhat soothe his headache. "How are your sisters?" he asks to keep his mind off the blooming migraine, voice blunt in a way he has mastered.

There's a moment of silence. He can hear Mike breathing. He's thinking, he knows that. Trying not to say something wrong or misstep. Never really getting to the root of the problem.

Great one, Will.

Mike finally sucks in a breath, he shrugs like it's a reflex. "They're good."

“Is Holly still doing martial arts? She was pretty badass for a 6 year old.”

Mike laughs, short and staccato. Will wants to laugh with him but he can't. His throat is stuck.

Will came over maybe 2, 3 times the very beginning of freshman year to work on whatever project they had been assigned. They got hungry a lot so they'd sneak into the kitchen and munch on carrots and would let Holly practice her Tae Kwon Do skills for them. It's strange. The memories that come back up when Will actually starts thinking about it.

The memory is half-remembered, like a dream fast fading. He can't fully remember. It's foggy, a haze-like memory, fading quickly from view.

Mike answers just as the memory slips fully away from him and leaves him feeling cold, and half-empty. “Not anymore. My mom and Ted are hoping she gets into the pageant circuit so she's going dancing lessons now.” Will notes it's Ted now. Just Ted. Not dad but *Ted*. It sounds like Mike feels a little ashamed to admit his parents made his little sister quit. Holly loved it. His eyes reflect the same disappointment.

They continue with the small talk for a few more moments. Mike does most of the talking. Will doesn't really comprehend what he's saying, too focused on his facial expressions. Eventually, though, once they remember the situation, the awkwardness seeps in and they get back to the problems. Mike drops a few more hints and teaches Will how to break up the problems into smaller parts.

“You’re good at this.” It slips past his lips accidentally.

Spots of pink appear on Mike's cheeks. “Good at what?”

“Teaching,” Will answers. “I wasn’t getting it when Mrs. Ambrose went on her tangents.”

“Yeah, she does that. But the cool thing about Chemistry is that it’s all around us, you know? Like we’re all made up of atoms; the whole world is. So making it, I don’t know, more real, helps me.” His eyes light up when he gets excited about a subject, Will notices, and it's kinda cute. He would never say as much, though, of course. There's no point.

Mike hums quietly while he checks Will's work on the last equation. “You did good,” he finally says. “I think you’re getting the hang of it.”

Fuck, he looks so perfect in this lighting, and his lips are outlined by the dim glow, and Will isn’t sure if he can even speak. “I doubt it, but thanks anyway.”

It's so easy to burn these bridges before they're even rebuilt. So easy to just lean forward and kiss him. So easy to let the world know he's gay.

There's a knock at the door and Will leaps away from Mike on the bed as if he was just caught doing something he shouldn't have been. "Come in," his voice quivers.

His mother appears in the doorway, Hopper beside her, hands pressed to his hips, uncomfortably staring anywhere which isn't them. He does that, sometimes. Which is stupid. Because Hopper is the most adult person he knows. "Mike, honey, are you staying for dinner?"

Mike shakes his head and looks between Will and the door. "My mom's expecting me."

The Chief shifts uncomfortably. "Right. Well, I can give you a ride."

Oh, Will realises, seeing the way the chief grimaces and half-nods. He doesn't want to leave.

He's heard the countless horror stories when his mom was half a glass deep in wine. He probably knows more about Will's breakdowns than his own doctor knows. Will wonders how long he was in Hawkins before he heard about the *incident*. Or the food. Or the months off school, the crying, waiting for everything to be over.

Not long, he guesses. His mom is very emotional after a glass of wine and one of those sappy feel-good movies. Hopper shifts once again. It amuses Will, the look of discomfort on his face, the man's inability to talk, when *El Hopper* is his daughter.

“Thanks.” Mike snaps the Chemistry book shut and turns to Will. “I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Will gives him a small smile.

He notices that the tips of Mike's ears are red again as he leaves.

He hears the slamming of the front door, the truck doors, and then Will is alone again in his room. The urge to self destruct is palpable.

If he listens closely, he can hear all around him the sound of the inevitable fall.

It's several minutes of tense silence in the truck before the Chief finally speaks. Mike swallows hard, the lump in his throat refusing to go away. The air in Hopper's car is stifling. It's his cop truck, complete with the Hawkins PD logo, and to Mike it feels a lot like he's being arrested.

The ride to his house feels like it takes way longer than it usually does. It must have only been fifteen minutes, but Mike's heart has been beating in his ears for what seemed like hours.

The inside of the truck is a mess, littered with paperwork, and Mike is scared to move in case he disturbs the ordered disorder. Instead he sits rigidly, legs pressed together, focusing on a thumb-sized picture of El wedged on the dashboard.

She's young in the picture, six or seven, but she's smiling in a gleeful way that Mike recognises so well. It helps relieve some of the pressure building in the center of his chest.

Why didn't he say something? Probably because by then, things had already been unravelled. Probably because he thought he could wait it out. That he could fix it with his stupid smile and by holding Will's hand. And he would've been able to, Mike thinks bitterly, if he weren't so damn fucked up.

Who reacts like that in the first place? Mike might have seen and done nothing, but still. It's still his fault. It's his fault. It is.

Is it?

Is it anyone's fault?

Whatever, Mike thinks, scrubbing at his eyes with balled up fists, as though that will clean his mind. He can't think about Will, he can't think about the shame in Will's eyes when he admitted he knew the party saw, in their old middle school lunchroom all those years ago, or the fear in his shaky voice.

He can't think about any of that, because Hopper is frowning at him, eyes skating between him and the road.

“Huh?” He asks, because he’s sure Hopper has said something, but he has no idea what. He’s too in his own head to have caught it, but now he notices that the radio volume has been lowered to a dull buzz and Hopper has something similar to concern shining in his eyes.

“Look.” The Chief sighs like this is already causing him massive amounts of fatigue. “That kid’s been through a lot, more than you know. And I’m not gonna let you— Despite how *I* , personally, feel about you, Joyce thinks you’re a good kid. And I know for a fact Will does too. But he doesn’t need *this*. And I certainly don’t need you screwin’ around either.”

He takes a second to fully understand Hopper's words. “I’m... not.”

“That’s not the point. I’ve been your age.”

Mike rolls his eyes. He can’t imagine Hopper being a teenager anymore than he can predict his own future.

“I’ve done some stupid shit in the past and I don’t want you to make the same mistakes that I did. But so help me, kid, if I find out you do something, *anything*, I’ll be damn sure to make sure you don’t get anywhere near him again. Understood?”

The truck pulls into the Wheelers’ driveway and Mike unbuckles his seatbelt. Hopper reaches over and places his hand on the door handle, keeping it shut. “Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Not good enough,” Hopper growls.

“Fine. Yes, *sir* .”

Hopper looks a little insane. And he is the Chief of Police, who's gonna question him if Mike suddenly goes missing? He also knows for a fact that Hopper hates him all the more because of the whole *dating thing* with El. He shakes his head, trying to ignore the morbid intrusive thought.

Mike nods, and the chief lets his hand fall, turning back to the steering wheel. “Good.”

“Thank– thank you for the ride,” he says, clambering out and slamming the door shut before anything can get anymore sincere.

No lights are on when Hopper drops him off.

He watches as the car drives off, leaving him alone on the front lawn.

The neighborhood around him is quiet, clean, neat. But at night, he just feels like he's on a soundstage. Nothing feels real, not like it did at Max's' place near the trailer park. There, music is always playing from somewhere, no matter what time of night it was. There were

dogs barking and people yelling - the sounds of inhabitation. Here, there are just crickets.

So Mike takes his leave, his head spinning as he goes through the front door.

The inside of the house is very cold and very quiet, and he can't help but feel like an intruder, breaking in after dark, even if it's only 5 past 9.

Mike turns on the kitchen light to find piles of unwashed dishes. He knows he should take the time to do them, but sleep and guilt are tugging at the back of his mind. Instead, he pours himself a glass of water, drinks it down, and adds it to the pile in the sink.

He's set on heading straight for the privacy of his bed when he gets inside, crawling under the sheets and sleeping away the emotional exhaustion of the day. He shouts a *"hey, I'm home"* to anyone that's listening.

No one is.

His dad is asleep in the living room yet again and he heads upstairs to his room.

The bed is unmade, and the sheets give off a sour smell, but again, he doesn't have the energy to change them. He'd take the time to clean at some point the next week, before his parents get on his back about

it. The house, but especially his room, feels like it's digging its nails into his arm, keeping him still.

He felt so separate from that version of himself; the version that stood quiet, stood around like things were fine, like his friend wasn't hurt; enough to feel weirdly separate from himself when remembering things from that time. He finds it hard to believe he ever fit in seamlessly.

Was he just stupid, that caught up that he just didn't notice something was off? Or was he just that good at lying to himself? Because by now the lump in his throat has sunk down to his gut and made a home there. But he has a suspicion that it had always been somewhere inside him, floating around in his blood, looking for a place to stick.

Laying on his bed, he stares up at the ceiling, his mind wandering to the evening. Hopper's threat seemed to imply he saw something else.

Just the delusions of a crazy old man, Mike thinks.

Nothing more. Nothing less.

And damn if it didn't hurt; knowing that's all it would be.

He sleeps long enough to dream about amber eyes, instrumentations that echo through his bones, and a half smile. He sleeps hard enough to forget it all before he wakes up.

Will has already yanked his bedroom door open when Jonathan's voice stops him.

"Mom told me Mike came round' today," he says it so softly Will wonders if he imagined it.

"What?"

"I'm just saying," Jonathan continues. He looks uncomfortable, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "You don't have to put up with Mike Wheeler."

Will bites his lip to stop himself from blurting out that he wants to put up with Mike Wheeler, forever if he can. Instead he shrugs. "He's tutoring me. I don't- I don't get what you're trying to say."

Jonathan scoffs, taking a step forward and Will has never felt so intimidated by his brother. They're the same height now, but Jonathan holds an authority Will can't, never will hold. It reminds him a little of their dad, but mostly of Chief Hopper, with his hands on his hips.

"He's not your friend, Will. Friends don't treat you that way."

"He hasn't treated me any type of way." Will protests, throat thick. It's true. Mike has been nothing but kind to him so far. He's not the

bad guy here. Why can't Jonathan see that?

"He abandoned you." Jonathan's voice is dry now, any trace of humour gone. Will wants his mom to charge out the bathroom and tell him to stop. He wants to be away from this bullshit.

But no one is coming to Will's rescue. He's not a child hiding behind his mother's legs, and he's certainly not Jonathan's little brother anymore who needs his protection.

There's a lump lodged deep in his throat. His mom always says: doing means anything but and something is better than nothing, and when you aren't fed love on a silver spoon, you learn to lick it off knives. The thought has never felt so right.

Once Jonathan leaves the room without another word, just a very pointed look, he remembers; he has a phone call to make.

Notes for the Chapter:

hello everyone! genuinely appreciate comments more than i could ever put into words, so if you could take just a little bit of time to give me feedback on what you think of this, it would make me so, so happy.

i'm also not sure how regular updates will be, since I'm juggling a bunch of things in my life as of now, but i'm going to try to aim for one chapter every few days-weeks.